



84.1966.1 Birthplace of Paul Dresser (1859-1906)  
84.1966.3 Birthplace of Paul Dresser (1859)  
Vigo County  
Marker Text Review Report  
3/21/2013

### Marker Texts

Composer of Indiana State Song, “On the Banks of the Wabash,” and other songs popular in the Gay Nineties. His famous brother, Theodore Dreiser, wrote *An American Tragedy* and other novels.

Composer of Indiana State Song, “On the Banks of the Wabash,” “My Gal Sal,” and many more, popular in the gay 90’s era. His famous brother, author Theodore Dreiser, wrote *An American Tragedy* and other novels.

### Report

The markers commemorating Paul Dresser (born Dreiser) have been reviewed because their files contained inadequate primary sources to verify the marker texts. This report also provides additional information about Dresser and the significance of his song “On the Banks of the Wabash.”

Both markers report Dresser’s birth date in 1859, but sources disagree and claim that he was born in 1857, 1858, or 1859.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Federal Census for the years 1860, 1870, and 1880 all list his birth year as “about 1858.” Both the 1860 and 1880 census records place him in Terre Haute, Indiana, but newspapers disagree on the exact location of his birth.<sup>2</sup> A pamphlet issued by the Vigo County Historical Society states that the house he reportedly grew up in was moved to Fairbanks Park on Dresser Dr. in Terre Haute in the 1960s, where it still stands today.<sup>3</sup>

The rest of the text is accurate for both markers, but each omits quite a bit of detail regarding Dresser’s life. As a young man, Dresser left home to work as an entertainer with a medicine show and later became a traveling minstrel.<sup>4</sup> He eventually moved to New York, where he joined a music publishing company.<sup>5</sup> During the late 1800s, he wrote many ballads, including “Just Tell Them That You Saw Me,” “The Letter That Never Came,” “My Gal Sal,” and his most popular song, “On the Banks of the Wabash.”<sup>6</sup> Published in 1897, “On the Banks of the Wabash” brought fame and fortune to Dresser.<sup>7</sup> The song reminisced about life along the Wabash River and achieved national popularity at the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The Indiana General Assembly adopted it as the official state song on March 14, 1913.<sup>9</sup>

The marker accurately states that Theodore Dreiser was Paul’s brother and that he wrote *An American Tragedy*, among other novels.<sup>10</sup> Paul Dresser died on January 30, 1906 and was buried in Chicago.<sup>11</sup>

### Further Information

The “Gay Nineties” is a nostalgic term coined in the 1920s, referring to the 1890s as a period of fun and frivolity. The 1890s are a part of the larger and more commonly referenced [Gilded Age](#).<sup>12</sup>

To learn more about music and popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century, see John Ogasapian, *Music of the Gilded Age* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), preview available through [GoogleBooks](#); and Joel Shrock, *The Gilded Age* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), preview available through [GoogleBooks](#).

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\*All newspaper articles were accessed via NewspaperArchive.com unless otherwise noted.



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<sup>1</sup> "Historians of State in Disagreement as to Birth Date of Paul Dresser," *Indianapolis Star*, March 8, 1940, accessed Newspaper Clippings File, Indiana State Library; *Birthplace of Paul Dresser*, Vigo County Historical Society, accessed Newspaper Clippings File, Indiana State Library "Paul Dresser," [Songwriters Hall of Fame](#); Donald E. Thompson, *Indiana Authors and Their Books, 1917-1966: A Continuation of Indiana Authors and Their Books 1816-1916, and Containing Additional Names from the Earlier Period* (Crawfordsville, IN: Wabash College, 1974), 173; Clayton W. Henderson, "Paul Dresser," [Indiana Historical Society](#).

<sup>2</sup> *1860 United State Federal Census*, Vigo County, Indiana, Roll M653\_303, Page 736, Line 18, July 23, 1860, accessed Ancestry.com; *1870 United States Federal Census*, Sullivan County, Indiana, Roll M593\_361, Page 168A, Line 15, August 30, 1870, accessed Ancestry.com; *1880 United States Federal Census*, Vigo County, Roll 318, Page 342D, Line 38, June 6, 1880; "Paul Dresser is Dead," *Sullivan Evening News*, January 31, 1906, 1.

The 1870 census places Dresser and his family in Sullivan, Indiana. The 1880 census lists his name as Paaul J. Dreiser. Other sources report that he changed his name from Dreiser to Dresser when he took up theatrical work.

<sup>3</sup> *Birthplace of Paul Dresser*; "Niece on Visit to Paul Dresser Home Here," *Terre Haute Star*, September 1, 1961, 1; *Vigo County Interim Report*, June 1984, 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> *1880 United States Federal Census*; "Paul Dresser is Dead," *Sullivan Evening News*, January 31, 1906, 1; "Songs of Sentiment That Made the Late Paul Dresser Rich and Famous," *Washington Post*, February 18, 1906, 9; J. J. Geller, "The Story Behind the Song," *Logansport Press*, March 14, 1926, 4.

Medicine shows featured traveling showmen who peddled miraculous cure medications in between a variety of entertainment acts. For general information about them see "Here Today, Here Tomorrow: Varieties of Medical Ephemera – Medical Show," [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#). The 1880 census reports that Dresser was working for "Agt P. Medicine," and his obituaries state that he performed songs and comical acts as part of the medicine show.

<sup>5</sup> "Songs Have Made Money," *Dubuque [Iowa] Herald*, October 10, 1900, 2; "Paul Dresser is Dead," *Sullivan Evening News*, January 31, 1906, 1; *Bath [Maine] Independent*, February 15, 1896, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> "Wabash Famed in Song," *Fort Wayne Morning Journal*, March 6, 1898, n.p.; *Logansport Daily Reporter*, April 21, 1898, n.p.; J. J. Geller, "The Story Behind the Song," *Logansport Press*, March 14, 1926, 4.

<sup>7</sup> "City News," *Connersville Daily Examiner*, July 29, 1897, n.p.; "Dresser's New Song," *Logansport Journal*, February 22, 1898, n.p.; *Logansport Daily Reporter*, April 21, 1898, n.p.; "Indiana to Have State Song," *Sullivan Democrat*, March 13, 1913, 6.

<sup>8</sup> "On the Banks of the Wabash," *Denver Evening Post*, February 12, 1898, 4, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> Century U.S. Newspapers; "Dresser's New Song," *Logansport Journal*, February 22, 1898, n.p.; "Songs Have Made Money," *Dubuque [Iowa] Herald*, October 19, 1900, 2.

"On the Banks of the Wabash" was published in 1897. According to an April 1898 article in the *Logansport Daily Reporter*, by that time, Dresser had already earned over \$50,000 in royalties on the song.



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<sup>9</sup> *Laws of the State of Indiana, 1913*, 693-694, accessed Indiana State Library Manuscripts; "Senate Calendar of All Bills and Joint Resolutions Pending in the Senate on Monday, March 10, 1913," in *Journal of the Indiana State Senate, 1913*, 227, accessed Indiana State Library Manuscripts; "Governor Gives State Sixty-Two Brand New Acts," *Indianapolis Star*, March 15, 1913, 1.

For Indiana Code IC 1-2-6-1 and lyrics to the song, see "Indiana State Song," [Indiana Historical Bureau](#).

<sup>10</sup> *1880 United States Federal Census*; Theodore Dreiser, *Twelve Men* (New York, 1919), 99-102; J.J. Geller, "The Story Behind the Song," *Logansport Press*, March 14, 1926; Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (New York, 1925); "New Dreiser Novel Comes Out at Last; Is in Two Volumes," *Galveston [Texas] Daily News*, December 27, 1925, 4; Dorothy Clark, "Fallacies About Dresser Cleared by News Story," *Terre Haute Tribune*, April 23, 1967, 4; Richard W. Dowell, "'On the Banks of the Wabash': A Musical Whodunit," *Indiana Magazine of History* 66 (June 1970): 95-109, accessed [Indiana Magazine of History](#).

In his book, *Twelve Men*, Dreiser wrote that he helped his brother Paul come up with the idea for the song "On the Banks of the Wabash" and that he penned the lyrics to the first verse and chorus. Other sources, including a 1967 *Terre Haute Tribune* article and a 1970 article published in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, question this claim and state that although Dreiser may have suggested the idea, Paul likely wrote the lyrics. For more information on the debate, see Richard Dowell's article, "'On the Banks of the Wabash': A Musical Whodunit," cited above.

<sup>11</sup> "Paul Dresser is Dead," *Sullivan Evening News*, January 31, 1906, 1, accessed NewspaperArchive.com; "Paul Dresser," *Wabash Valley, Indiana Obituaries, 1900-2010*, accessed Ancestry.com. See also "Paul Dresser," [Find A Grave](#).

<sup>12</sup> For further reading: Robert L. Gale, *The Gay Nineties in America: A Cultural Dictionary of the 1890s* (University of Michigan, Greenwood Press, 1992); Diane Telgen, *Defining Moments: The Gilded Age* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, Inc., 2012).